AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION PROGRAM

Annual Report to the Congress - 1964

United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service

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In 1964, the people of America benefited from a half-billion dollars worth of conservation work based upon a public investment through the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP) of only half that much. Farmers matched the public's investment from their own resources.

The ACP was used to attack land use problems on an unusually broad front during 1964 — through community conservation projects, shifting land out of crop production into non-intensive farming, and natural disaster assistance.

The year saw a high level of establishment of permanent cover with ACP aid — practices which have at least 20 million acres under perennial grasses and legumes, water, and trees that otherwise would now be in row crop and small grain production. This much more in recent years would have meant a harvested crop acreage some 7 percent above what we actually had.

This excess would have made much more difficult the highly successful effort to reduce grain surpluses during those years. Most of the price-breaking surpluses of the past have resulted from overproduction of less than 10 percent. But for the ACP, these acres might have caused other crops also to be in surplus.

Help to Low-Income Farmers

ACP assistance is of special value in enabling low-income farmers to carry on needed conservation work — and in doing so to improve their farming operations and their income levels. Poor land breeds poverty, and poverty leads to neglected land. Cost-sharing helps low-income farmers break out of this tragic cycle.

Santa Fe County, New Mexico, offers an example of how ACP agreements can be used to help farmers at the poverty and near-poverty level. Farm land in the county is largely owner-operated. Most of the farmers are descendants of early Spanish explorers, or members of Indian pueblos, and most of these families are in the low income category. Water — the key to growing any crops in the area — comes from snow melt in the mountains of north central New Mexico and must be diverted from streams.

Earthen community irrigation ditches called "acequias" — some of them dating from the 16th and 17th centuries — lose up to 50 percent of their effectiveness because of seepage and clogging with brush and siltation. Downstream farms often get little or no water during the growing season.

During 1964, members of six community ditch organizations in Santa Fe County pooled their Federal cost-share assistance under the Agricultural Conservation Program in six separate agreements. Altogether, 14,413 linear feet of concrete ditch lining was installed in the six acequias, benefiting 986 acres of irrigated cropland which will once again produce high-quality vegetables, chile peppers, and fruits, which are needed by the farm families and in great demand for expanding local markets. Farmers and community leaders are already looking ahead to establishing cooperative packing sheds and planning more orderly and profitable systems of marketing.

The pooling agreement, which was used in this New Mexico project, is a key tool in helping low-income families to improve their farming and living levels. Some conservation problems are so large in scope, or take in so wide an area, that one farmer or rancher cannot solve them alone — even with cost-share assistance. Such problems may be solved through agreements, under which a number of farmers agree to perform designated practices and pool their ACP cost-share assistance. The combined efforts become a single project.

Clean Water

Clean water concerns everybody, and watershed protection in recent years has become of increasing concern to all citizens. With this concern has come a deeper understanding of the vital contribution agricultural conservation makes toward clear, clean water.

Proper land treatment on individual farms and ranches has rightly been called the key to the success of the clean water program in any watershed. And every farmer who manages his land wisely through the application of needed conservation measures is contributing toward watershed conservation work.

ACP assistance has proved to be a most effective influence in getting farmers to carry out the needed land-treatment measures and in speeding up their application. This work is essential in prolonging the life of expensive water storage structures.

Significant practices in water conservation and management, approved for ACP cost-sharing in watersheds, as well as elsewhere, include:

* The establishment or improvement of vegetative cover — to increase water penetration, lessen runoff, reduce erosion and siltation, and keep the water clean.

* Tree planting and timber stand improvement, usually on sloping land — to provide many forest cover benefits, and, when planted for shelterbelts, to reduce the waste of snow moisture and evaporation from the protected cropland.

* Terracing, land leveling, contour farming, and contour stripcropping — to increase water infiltration and reduce damaging and wasteful runoff.

* The construction of water-storage reservoirs — to permit or encourage animal agriculture and the growth of protective vegetative cover, and to accumulate beneficial and widely dispersed water supplies on the land.

Other water-saving practices include lining irrigation ditches, reorganizing irrigation systems, and pitting or contour scarification or furrowing of range and pastureland.

Erosion

Erosion is by far the country's most widespread conservation problem. The soil itself is washed or blown away, leaving only holes and gullies as visible reminders of wasted natural resources.

While not limited to agricultural land, erosion in some form is present on almost every farm. The Agricultural Conservation Program offers a wide variety of practices for attacking the problem.

In some instances, erosion control calls for the construction of terraces, diversion ditches, or dikes. Terracing retards erosion and holds moisture on slopes too steep to be stabilized by contour planting and contour stripcropping alone.

In other instances, detention-type or check dams to prevent water waste in transit may be the best solution. Dams afford valuable protection against flood damage and control soil erosion by slowing down or preventing excessive runoff of water. More watering-places mean wider grazing and therefore less overgrazing — a valuable conservation gain because overgrazed pastures and ranges lose their grass cover and become erosion hazards.

Stripcropping, land shaping, contour tillage, and permanent sod waterways are other erosion-control practices eligible for ACP cost-sharing. Tree and shrub plant-

ing, including shelterbelts or windbreaks, is an important practice in many areas.

On most of the land subject to erosion problems, however, grass and legume cover is the most effective, practical, and economical means of holding down highly erodible soil, controlling erosion, and preventing siltation.

Community Conservation Projects

Where specially adapted conservation efforts are needed in an area, a new "community" Agricultural Conservation Program may come into action. Where needed an increased share of Federal support often ranging up to 80 percent of the total cost of critical measures — instead of the usual share of around 50 percent is authorized. In addition, due to these unusual conservation needs, larger sums are made available than those usually provided in the area.

Examples:

In Illinois — ACP financing made possible a project which solved a city's water supply problem and at the same time solved farm conservation problems on 1,300 acres. Four dams — along with tile, sod waterways, terraces, and permanent cover — brought under control a creek which had previously run wild. Rattlesnake Creek — in Coles County — is three miles long. Yet it drops 190 feet in those three miles — and before it was tamed by this farmer-ACP teamwork, it created havoc through erosion and silting.

In Maine — a Special ACP Project for a part of the Limestone Stream Watershed in Aroostook County will speed up land treatment to prevent flooding, even out stream flow, and correct serious erosion problems on and from intensively cultivated cropland. Annual soil losses now are estimated to run as high as 16 tons an acre on the critical areas. In addition, the work will help correct a flooding and silting problem that has frequently polluted the water supply of the town of Limestone.

ACP — Recreation and Wildlife

Many ACP practices provide indirect benefits in terms of establishing and improving outdoor recreation facilities, as well as fish and wildlife conservation. So waterways, tree planting and timber stand improvement, establishing and improving cover crops, building farm ponds, stripcropping — all of these are valuable in relation to wildlife and recreation and to scenic values.

ACP cost-share assistance primarily for such wildlife practices as establishing food and cover plots, developing or restoring shallow water areas for wildlife, and building ponds for fishing is being increasingly used by farmers to provide benefits to non-farm people.

Under this phase of the ACP, 1964 fiscal year expenditures for cost-sharing with farmers were over $1.4 million, or more than double the previous year. Participation continues to increase.

In Allegany County, New York, the program has generated considerable interest in the county among sportsmen's groups. For example, when local sportsmen's clubs released pheasants in the county in the fall of 1964, they requested the names of ACP wildlife practice participants and released birds on their farms.

They were also active in interesting landowners in the program in 1964, and plan to help in gaining additional participation in 1965. One club has promised to ask farmers (perhaps 35 to 50) to plant at least 100 acres of bird food plots in its area.

Because of interest in the program in Allegany County, the ASC State Committee allotted an extra $1,200 for additional cost-sharing on the 1964 program in the

county. This was in addition to the normal county allotment. The 54 farms participating established 147.5 acres of wildlife food plots, 3,500 feet of wildlife cover along fence rows, a wildlife marsh of about 5 acres, and 26 fish ponds.

ACP Disaster Assistance

Natural disasters — floods, droughts, fires, hurricanes, and an earthquake — made 1964 a busy year for emergency ACP in many States. Special funds, in addition to regular ACP funds, were authorized for use where emergency conservation measures were needed to help farmers recover from the effect of natural disaster, and in counties designated as such disaster areas by the Secretary of Agriculture.

In 1964, to correct flood damage, a total of $4,344,000 was allocated for use in 139 counties in 14 States. Conservation damage from destructive drought called for such allocations totalling $5,948,000 to 13 States, and a total of 398 counties. Other causes (earthquake, fire, windstorm) in 4 States brought the aggregate allocation to $10,825,000.

Some examples help to demonstrate how emergency ACP aid is used "to return the land to productive agricultural use."

On June 26, 1964, Secretary Freeman under authority in Public Law 85-58, designated nine Montana counties as disaster areas following very heavy flooding. Emergency funds were allocated to carry out flood damage repair in 1964. This included removing debris from farmland; shaping, grading, and releveling eroded farmland areas; restoring irrigation and open drainage ditches; repairing range fences; and reseeding areas of vegetative cover destroyed by the flood.

Kentucky provided a dual example of flooding and drought in 1964. On May 15, the Secretary designated 39 counties as flood disaster areas. An allocation of emergency funds was made to the Kentucky ASC State Committee for use in these counties and about 2,000 farms were helped. This money has been used for removing debris from farmlands; shaping, grading, and filling eroded or silted land areas; removing debris from stream channels and stabilizing stream banks; cleaning out open drainage ditches and repairing tile drains; restoring terraces, farm ponds, and waterways; and reseeding damaged areas to permanent type vegetative cover.

Also, in June and July, 34 Kentucky counties were designated drought disaster areas. Funds were allocated, primarily for reestablishment of vegetative cover destroyed by the extended drought, on land subject to serious erosion unless cover is reestablished.

Still a different example is found in Florida, where hurricane damage and associated flood damage (Hurricane Dora) occurred late in the year, and the work is to be accomplished during calendar year 1965, in contrast to the others which constitute 1964 projects. Six counties were named as disaster areas. Restoration measures will include filling gullies and grading eroded land areas, reestablishing permanent vegetative cover on such areas, and reestablishing permanent sod waterways.

Drought and the ACP

The 1964 drought, which affected much of the Nation, would have been still worse in its effects had it not been for the conservation movement of the last three decades, including ACP. Much conservation work has a direct effect on the soil, helping it to catch and hold water. Other practices provide water for livestock.

A previous study at a Missouri Experiment Station showed that land with terraces and contour and conservation cropping practices holds more of the water that falls on it than does land without such conservation treatment. During an 8-year period, the average annual runoff from land with conservation treatment was only 70 percent of

that from land without such treatment.

In three drier years during the 8-year period, the conserving effect of terraces was even greater. During those years, runoff from treated land was less than 42 percent of that from land not treated with conservation practices. The reduced runoff (water saved) in those three years totaled more than 230,000 gallons per acre.

During one extremely dry year, practically all the rain that fell on conservation-treated land soaked into the soil — runoff was measured at a trace.

A similar study at an Iowa station with a different soil type showed that average annual runoff from treated land was only 28 percent of that from land without conservation practices.

By helping provide soil conservation treatment that allows more of the rain that falls to soak into the ground, cover that keeps the soil surface cooler to retard evaporation, cover that helps prevent topsoil loss through washing and blowing, and improved water sources for livestock, the Agricultural Conservation Program is working against drought throughout the Nation.

Program Operations and Accomplishments

ACP and its accomplishments are reviewed annually in the light of changing conditions, and recommendations are made to improve the program. The Extension Service, the Farmers Home Administration, the Forest Service, the Soil Conservation Service, soil and water conservation district governing bodies, and many other agencies and organizations take part in this process in the counties and States.

The 1964 program was operated, as directed by the Congress, at a level of $250 million, including administration. ACP assistance made available for farmers amounted to $220 million. Also, in disaster areas designated as provided in Public Law 85-58 — in 504 different counties of 24 States — almost $11 million of special funds were allocated to share costs with farmers for emergency conservation measures required due to floods, windstorms, drought, fire, or earthquake.

Major Program Accomplishments

About 1.1 million farms participated. About 2.2 million farms have participated one or more times in the last 4 years. On more than 0.6 million farms in 1962-1964, significant conservation work was done — thanks primarily to encouragement by ASC community committeemen — where little or none had been done before.

Major program accomplishments under the ACP reported in fiscal year 1964 include:

57 thousand ponds constructed to distribute grazing, permit grassland farming, control erosion and fire, heal gullying, conserve irrigation and other surface water, and benefit wildlife.

651 thousand acres of terraces constructed to control erosion or to detain, control, or conserve water.

355 thousand acres of stripcropping systems established to control wind or water erosion and conserve water.

42 thousand acres of permanent sod waterways established to control erosion and sedimentation, heal gullies, and safely dispose of excess runoff.

10 million acres of conserving vegetative cover established to control erosion, reduce sedimentation of streams and reservoirs, improve soil structure, conserve water, and for adjustment to better land uses.

2 million acres of undesirable shrubs controlled on range of pasture to permit growth of desirable cover for erosion control and to save moisture.

224 thousand acres of trees and shrubs planted for forestry purposes, erosion control, watershed stabilization, land-use adjustment, or wildlife benefits.

183 thousand acres of forest tree stands improved for forestry purposes, erosion control, and watershed management.

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